Preparing Our Hearts for Prayer: A Study of Psalm 131

Study

Psalm 131, one of the fifteen Songs of Ascents, offers profound instruction on preparing the heart for prayer and worship. In three brief verses, the psalmist David outlines essential qualities for approaching God: humility before the Lord, a quiet, contented spirit like that of a weaned child, and hopeful trust in God's covenant faithfulness. This study examines each verse to show how God's people should prepare their hearts as they come before their Sovereign Creator. Just as ancient Israel sang these psalms while journeying to Jerusalem's temple or ascending its steps, believers today can apply these principles as they approach the throne of grace through Christ. The psalm emphasizes that authentic prayer flows from hearts marked by childlike dependence, freedom from worldly distractions, and confidence in God's plentiful redemption secured through Jesus Christ.

Introduction

Psalm 131 is among the shortest psalms in Scripture, though not quite the shortest, as that distinction belongs to Psalm 117, with only two verses. Yet despite its brevity, this psalm carries profound weight, teaching God's people how to prepare their hearts for worship and prayer. It belongs to a special collection of fifteen psalms, grouped from Psalm 120 to 134, each bearing the title "A Song of Ascents," which some Bible translations render as "songs of degrees."

Although commentators debate the precise origins of these songs, most believe that God's people sang them as they journeyed toward Jerusalem to observe the various feasts that the Lord commanded them to celebrate annually. Exodus 23:14-17 describes three major festivals: the Feast of Unleavened Bread, the Feast of Harvest, and the Feast of Ingathering. During these sacred occasions, people traveled from all corners of Israel to the Tabernacle and later to the temple in Jerusalem, the place where God dwelt among His people and where His blessings could be found. These songs helped prepare their hearts for worship and prayer as they made their pilgrimage.

Another tradition holds that the Levite priests sang these fifteen songs of ascent as they climbed the fifteen steps leading into the temple in Jerusalem, singing one psalm per step. Whether sung on the road to Jerusalem or on the temple stairs, these psalms served a crucial purpose. They provided instructions for preparing the heart, reminders of the people's identity as part of God's covenant nation, and declarations of who God is: the Sovereign and Almighty God of heaven and earth, especially the Covenant God of Israel.

As we consider this psalm today, we come to the same Sovereign and Almighty God who, through the work of our blessed Savior, has placed His church under a New Covenant, a covenant sealed by God's precious blood poured out in the person of our Lord Jesus Christ. What can we learn from the psalmist about preparing to approach God in prayer? Each verse presents distinct instruction: verse 1 highlights humility before God, verse 2 describes a quiet or hushed spirit before God, and verse 3 shows a hopeful spirit before God.

Humility

The first verse could not be any clearer. Humility before God is essential. We can hear its sincere expression in David's words: "O Lord, my heart is not lifted up, my eyes are not raised too high, I do not occupy myself with things too great and marvelous for me." The psalmist is not casual or flippant in his approach to prayer. There is no pride in him, no involvement in matters beyond his proper concern. He does not think highly of himself. Here stands a man who recognizes his sinful heart and understands the need for a childlike, humble spirit when approaching his perfectly holy God.

We have an example from the Lord Jesus in His answer to His disciples' question, "Who, then, is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" Matthew 18 records that the Lord called a little child to Himself and said, "Unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven."

Who does God listen to in prayer? The prophet Isaiah answers that question: "This is the one to whom I will look: he who is humble and contrite in spirit and trembles at my word" (Isaiah 66:2). Does that describe us? Are we coming before God, asking and seeking with humble hearts?

In his first letter, the Apostle Peter emphasizes the importance of humility, and we should observe the link with prayer: "Clothe yourselves, all of you, with humility toward one another, for God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble. Humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God so that at the proper time he may exalt you, casting all your anxieties on him because he cares for you" (1 Peter 5:6-7). How do we cast our anxieties upon the Lord? Through humble prayer. John Flavel wisely said, "They that know God will be humble, and they that know themselves cannot be proud."

First, this psalm teaches us that humility is essential when we come before our covenant God. We must approach with hearts that are not lifted up and eyes not raised too high.

A Quiet Spirit

Secondly, in verse two, the psalmist highlights the value and importance of a quiet or subdued spirit before God, not silence, but calmness and contentment before God. He writes: "But I have calmed and quieted my soul, like a weaned child with its mother; like a weaned child is my soul within me." The psalmist uses an example that most people understand: a child who no longer needs his mother's breast milk.

We have all been around a hungry baby in the arms of a nursing mother who can think of nothing else except feeding. But in verse 2, we see a picture of a child who is finished with the mother's milk and no longer wants to nurse. Now there is a sense of calm and contentment in its mother's arms.

What the psalmist is expressing here is being weaned off the sinful desires of the flesh, weaned off those worldly things that distract our hearts and minds from coming to God, things that prevent us from prayer. Are we, by God's grace, going through this process of weaning off sinful habits? Are we content in the Lord, maintaining that mindset and heart when approaching God in prayer?

Can we say with the Apostle Paul, "The world has been crucified to me, and I to the world" (Galatians 6:14)? Verse 2 of Psalm 131 captures the language of deep contentment, not because of external circumstances, not because we might have good health, a good income, a good family, or anything else, but because the psalmist has soul contentment before God. It is the

same contentment that the Apostle Paul mentioned in his letter to the Philippians when he wrote, "I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content" (Philippians 4:11).

The question for each of us is whether we recognize this same quiet spirit of contentment as we approach God in prayer.

Hope

In the third and final verse, the psalmist demonstrates that besides having a humble and quiet spirit, approaching the Lord always involves hope. He declares: "O Israel, hope in the Lord from this time forth and forevermore." A childlike, quiet spirit always carries a certain sense of hope. His reference to the nation serves again as a reminder that God is Israel's covenant God.

One commentator writes about verse 3: "Hoping in the Lord is turning away from self-sufficient, frantic living and turning to quiet dependence upon God." These words echo the previous psalm, Psalm 130, that great psalm on forgiveness of sins. Look at verse 7: "O Israel hope in the Lord! For with the Lord there is steadfast love, and with him is plentiful redemption."

Remember Psalm 42, in which the psalmist struggles against depression and discouragement of the soul? He says, "Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why so disturbed within me?" What was the solution? "Hope in God, for I shall again praise him, my salvation and my God" (Psalm 42:5). The author of the Book of Lamentations wrote, "The Lord is my portion, says my soul; therefore I will hope in him" (Lamentations 3:24).

So we hope in the Lord because with him, as Psalm 130:7 declares, there is "plentiful redemption." In New Testament language, we come boldly to the throne of grace because our salvation has been purchased. We have abundant redemption bought by the precious blood of our blessed Savior, as Ephesians 1:7 affirms.

Conclusion

To summarize, Psalm 131 teaches us to approach God humbly, with a quiet, childlike spirit, and with a hopeful heart because of our blessed Savior. These three qualities, humility, quietness, and hope, mark the heart that is truly prepared to seek the Lord in prayer. May the Lord bless His word for the benefit of our souls. May we cultivate these qualities as we approach the throne of

grace, coming before our covenant God with reverence, contentment, and confident trust in His redemption through Jesus Christ. Amen.